

International Tracing Service: 50 years of service to humanity

by Charles-Claude Biedermann

A BRIEF HISTORY

Though half a century old this year, the International Tracing Service has lost none of its relevance. In its 50 years of service to humanity, it has clarified the fate and whereabouts of thousands of people, reunited separated families and helped — to the extent that such a thing is possible — to make good the wrong done to those persecuted by the Nazis.

The founding of the International Tracing Service was a direct result of events during the Nazi dictatorship in Germany and the aftermath of the Second World War. In 1933 Adolph Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany by the Weimar Republic's President von Hindenburg. This triggered the development of a totalitarian "*Führer* State" in which the Nazis were able, by issuing a series of edicts and decrees, to purge society not only of their political opponents but also of others who were not to their liking, such as Jews.

The "Reich President's Ordinance for the Protection of the People and the State" of 28 February 1933 formed the basis for "preventive detention" and the setting up of concentration camps. One of the fundamental rights abolished under these emergency powers was the inviolability of personal freedom.

The "Law to relieve the distress of the people and the *Reich*" (Enabling Act) of 24 March 1933 freed Adolph Hitler of all constitutional constraint and parliamentary control. Although initially limited to a period of four years, the Act was renewed in 1937 and again in 1939. In May 1943, its force of law was extended indefinitely "by decree of the *Führer*". The mass deportation of Jews from Nazi-occupied territory had already begun in 1941. The Wannsee Conference

then sealed their fate in January 1942 when it adopted the “final solution to the Jewish question in Europe”.

To satisfy the enormous demands of industry, of the arms manufacturers in particular, foreign workers began arriving in the German Reich in 1939. Some were recruited abroad and came more or less voluntarily. The others were brought in by force.

There was at the time no international agreement to safeguard the human dignity of civilians deported or otherwise persecuted by the Nazi regime. Prisoners of war, on the other hand, had the guaranteed right to be treated as human beings thanks to the two 1929 Geneva Conventions and the 1907 Hague Convention No. X (exceptions to this were German POWs in the USSR and Soviet prisoners in Germany, since the Soviet Union was not bound by the 1929 Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war).

All attempts to bring assistance to concentration camp inmates or forced labourers quartered in camps or private homes were in vain. No lists were available abroad of who was being held where.

The inaccessibility of such people, the lack of records, the many families separated in the chaos of war and the large-scale mass migration — some of it overseas — that was taking place throughout Europe were all of serious concern to the Committee on Displaced Populations of the Allied Post-War Requirement Bureau set up in London during the war years. In 1943, a tracing office was established at the British Red Cross under the direction of Major Eyre Carter of the Foreign Office Relief Department and the decision was taken to set up national tracing services once the still occupied territories of Europe had been liberated, in order to find the deportees and others who could not be accounted for.

Within a year, the Allied military authorities faced the problem of registering displaced civilians in the areas they had liberated. The tracing office was therefore placed under the responsibility of the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEP) in Versailles.

SHAEP referred to the deportees as “displaced persons” (or “DPs”) and ordered their names to be entered onto file cards to facilitate the tracing process.

It was also necessary to assemble lists of concentration camp inmates and the registration cards of displaced persons. Much of this work was done by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) formed in Washington by President Roosevelt in 1943.

On 28 June 1945, UNRRA, which was meanwhile also based in Versailles, was moved together with SHAEF to Frankfurt. After SHAEF was disbanded the following month, the tracing office it had been running was taken over by the Combined Displaced Persons Executive and all the documents were henceforth centralized there.

In September of that year, the Allied Control Council gave UNRRA the task of setting up a central tracing bureau to find missing members of the armed forces and civilians of the Allied countries, to gather and store all documents concerning them and to begin reuniting separated families.

Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick E. Morgan, UNRRA Chief of Operations in Germany, suggested on 16 November 1945 that the Central Tracing Bureau be transferred from Frankfurt north to the small Hessian town of Arolsen, with Colonel J.R. Bowring as its director. Arolsen, the former capital of a principality, was chosen because it was centrally situated for the four occupation zones and because it contained large, undamaged buildings and good telegraph and telephone facilities. UNRRA and the Central Tracing Bureau were thus moved in early January 1946 and combined to become the UNRRA Central Tracing Bureau (CTB), Arolsen.

In the previous month the Allies had ordered municipal authorities throughout Germany to draw up lists of the names of nationals of United Nations countries (i.e. members of the anti-Axis alliance) who had been resident in Germany during the war or were then living there in late 1945. Several copies of the resulting lists had to be made and sent in to regional collection points, which in turn forwarded a copy to the Central Tracing Bureau in Arolsen.

UNRRA ceased operations on 1 June 1947 and the Central Tracing Bureau was taken over by the Preparatory Commission of the International Refugee Organization (PCIRO) the following month. At a meeting at its Geneva headquarters in November 1947, the Preparatory Commission decided that the Central Tracing Bureau would be renamed the International Tracing Service (ITS) as of 1 January 1948. And so it has remained until this day. The ITS was run by the International Refugee Organization (IRO) until March 1951.

UNRRA's main task was the repatriation of the many victims of persecution. Extensive damage to the transport network made this a difficult undertaking. As many of the victims for various reasons did not want to return home, the IRO found itself arranging for their emigration.

On 1 April 1951, the International Tracing Service was taken over by the Allied High Commission for Germany (HICOG).

During this time, the International Tracing Service changed premises on several occasions. In 1952 it was decided to give the ITS its own offices. That same year saw the construction of what is still the main building.

When preparations for abrogation of the Occupation Statute began under the Paris Treaties in 1954, a way had to be found to allow the ITS to continue its work.

In May 1955 the Occupation Statute ended and the Convention of 25 May 1952 on Relations between the Three Powers and the Federal Republic of Germany finally came into effect.

The Allied High Commission for Germany was disbanded.

Under the Bonn Agreements of June 1955 between the Western Allies and the Federal Republic of Germany, the latter undertook to finance the International Tracing Service. Under a protocol to the Bonn Agreements, the management and administration of the ITS were entrusted to the International Committee of the Red Cross on account of the latter's humanitarian and neutral character. On 6 June 1955, Dr. Konrad Adenauer, who was then both Federal German Chancellor and Foreign Minister, officially asked ICRC President Paul Ruegger to take up this task.

Since then, the Director of the ITS has always been an ICRC delegate and a Swiss citizen.

Although the justification for the work done by the International Tracing Service and indeed its very existence under those treaties has been repeatedly re-examined, its legal status remains unclear. Clarification would be useful not only for those whom the ITS works to assist but also for its own staff. This alone will enable it to complete its tasks in accordance with its mandate and ensure that its archives will be duly preserved for future generations.

Efforts to that effect are now under way.

The work of the ITS is supervised by an international commission made up of government representatives of Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The International Commission has assigned the ITS four main tasks, i.e. the assembling, classification, evaluation and preservation of personal documents relating to the civilian victims of Nazi persecution, including deportees. These activities make it possible, even after many years, to reunite separated families and issue certificates of detention or forced labour on which compensation or pension claims can then be based. Such information is divulged only to the former victims

themselves, their assigns or the relevant government social-security services.

Assembling

When the International Tracing Service was still being run by UNRRA, hardly any documentation was available to it. Only in 1947/1948, after the ITS came under the direction of the International Refugee Organization, did it come into possession of some of the documents that were recovered by Allied troops when they liberated the concentration camps and were now no longer needed by the International Military Tribunal for the war-crimes trials in Nuremberg.

In addition it received a large number of lists drawn up, on Allied orders, by German municipal authorities between 1946 and 1950 and the post-war material gathered when registering "displaced persons".

Classification

With such an impressive array of documents containing information about people from around the world, a way had to be found of arranging this material in such a manner that when requests were made concerning an individual, all available information could be picked out quickly and easily.

To make the information readily accessible, every single name appearing in the documents has been, and continues to be, placed on index cards which are then filed in alphabetical/phonetic order in a central index of names. This index is still growing and now contains some 45 million reference cards. It is the key to the analysis of the documents used in processing incoming queries and requests, it is the linchpin of the archives in Arolsen.

Preservation

The ITS possesses documents concerning the following categories of victims:

- Germans and non-Germans held in concentration camps or prisons;

- non-Germans deported during the Second World War for forced labour in territory controlled by the Third Reich;
- non-German deportees (“displaced persons”) who were cared for by UN relief organizations after the war.

The files have grown steadily over the years. In 1981, the ITS had the equivalent of 15,670 linear metres (9.7 miles) of documents — calculated standing back to back — at its disposal. By 1992, this figure had increased to 20 kilometres, i.e. almost twelve and a half miles. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the resultant opening up of Eastern Germany enabled the ITS to obtain documents from the territory of the former German Democratic Republic. And in 1989 the first success was achieved in obtaining information from archives in Moscow. The ITS had previously had access to virtually no documentary material from the Soviet sphere of influence. Progress is continuing.

Newly acquired documents are continually being integrated into the archives, a time-consuming process. Before its actual incorporation, new material must first be sorted, labelled and registered. Reference cards are then drawn up indicating names and the document’s whereabouts. Finally, the reference cards are inserted in alphabetical/phonetic order in the Central Index of Names. This last operation ensures that many previous enquirers who have not yet received a positive reply or who have received only incomplete information can later obtain confirmation or supplementary information for certificates already issued.

Apart from integrating new material, documents already in the archives must be carefully preserved (this includes microfilming of the entire collection). Expansion has been necessary over the years to store the documents properly. In 1989, for example, an additional 1,850 square metres (almost 20,000 sq. ft) of office space was required. Most of this has since been provided and the ITS today occupies six buildings in addition to the main building, which was renovated in 1981. All except one are in the centre of Arolsen.

Evaluation

Since 1986 there has been a steady increase in the number of enquiries made to the ITS. In 1988, they exceeded 100,000 for the first time in many years. In 1992, a total of 161,465 enquiries were registered from 57 different countries.

In recent years a change has taken place in the nature of the enquiries. In 1981, for example, the largest category (30%) was requests for certificates of detention. Today, over half are for certificates of employment.

Though the war ended almost fifty years ago, tracing requests still figure prominently in the work of the ITS. In conjunction with National Red Cross Societies around the world, it still manages to reunite families separated during the war.

Classification and evaluation are carried out in several specialized departments, according to subject matter.

The *Concentration Camp Documents Section* provides reports and excerpts from documents for people who were held in concentration camps, other types of camps and prisons.

These excerpts, which bear the official stamp of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, require no further legal authentication; they are recognized around the world. If there is clear evidence that someone died in a concentration camp and if registry office certification is required, this is provided by a special registry office in Arolsen. Set up on 1 September 1949 at the instigation of the International Tracing Service, the office is run by the Federal German state of Hesse. Documents recording deaths in concentration camps that were not certified at the time by the camp's own registry office are forwarded by the ITS to this special office. There the deaths are entered into a special official register. A death certificate is issued if close relatives of the victim apply for it from the ITS.

In the *War-time Documents Section*, enquiries are processed for non-Germans who were brought to Germany as forced labourers during the Second World War. The certificates issued by this section serve as proof of whereabouts and employment during that period.

The *Post-War Document Section* deals with enquiries concerning non-Germans — most of whom are today stateless — who were registered between 1945 and 1951 by relief organizations such as UNRRA and the International Refugee Organization in the American, British and French occupation zones of Germany, in Austria and in other countries such as Britain, Italy and Switzerland. The main task of this section is to confirm the place of residence in the post-war period as well as the entitlement to care received from the International Refugee Organization. Residence certificates frequently contain details given by the individual to the respective organization just after the war about where he or she had been living during the conflict. These certificates often represent the only official proof of the person's whereabouts during the Second World War.

The *Child-Tracing Section* handles enquiries from or about non-Germans born from 1927 to 1949 who lived either in Germany during the war or in the American, British or French occupation zones after hostilities ceased. Most enquirers are seeking clarification of their origins, i.e. they are looking for parents and relatives. Those sending in the enquiries are people now in their fifties who feel an ever stronger need to trace their roots. This explains the recent increase in the number of requests for such information. The ITS also helps people to obtain birth and residence certificates. The birth certificates stored in the archives can serve as proof of residence for the child's mother. As they often contain details about the father, they can help him, to obtain a much-needed residence certificate.

The actual *Tracing Section* processes enquiries concerning non-Germans who either went missing in German territory during the war or lost contact with their families in the early post-war period. This section has no archives of its own, but information on persons being sought is often to be found in the files of other sections. For example, if the person in question survived a concentration camp or forced labour, there may well be post-war documents indicating his or her return to the country of origin or emigration abroad.

The tracing process requires not only analysis of the available documents but also involves requests for information from various national authorities and a wide range of organizations throughout the world, including National Red Cross Societies. Since it came into being, the ITS has issued over 7.2 million pieces of information and opened two million files to do so. In all its work, care is taken to protect people's right to privacy. Confidential data remain confidential: information is given only to the individuals concerned or their assigns. When tracing is successful and a person is found, the address is passed on to the enquirer only with that person's express consent.

Provision was made in the Bonn Agreements for the government of every country on the International Commission for the ITS to have its own liaison office with the Service. This is currently the case for Belgium, France, Italy and the United States. The Netherlands has announced that it will be setting up an office before the end of 1993. This presence enables the national authorities of each country better to defend the interests of the former victims of Nazi persecution living there.

The far-reaching political changes of recent years have not only affected the number of enquiries and the countries from which they come (for example, enquiries from the former Soviet Union are sixty times more numerous now than before) but have also sparked debate on the continued existence of the International Tracing Service itself.

Following the conclusion of the so-called two-plus-four talks, the Treaty on the Final Settlement on Germany was signed on 12 September 1990 in Moscow. This superseded the 1952 Convention on Relations between the Three Powers and the Federal Republic of Germany as well as the Convention on the Settlement of Matters Arising out of the War and the Occupation.

Despite the fact that the latter Convention is now no longer in force, the Federal German government confirmed in September 1990 the continuing validity of its provision regarding the ITS (Chapter 7, Article 1):

“Displaced persons and refugees

The Federal Republic of Germany assumes the obligation:

(d) to guarantee the continuation of the work that is presently being carried out by the International Tracing Service”.

The fact that this provision has been upheld shows that the work of the International Tracing Service is as relevant as ever.

Many former forced labourers and other victims of Nazi persecution who today live in the former Soviet Union and Poland have been encouraged by the aforesaid political changes to take a less stoical view of their past and to claim their rights. In many countries new funds are now available for such victims.

Whereas a decade ago about 33,000 enquiries a year arrived at the ITS, it now receives five times as many and can barely cope. Enquirers must now be prepared to wait two years for a conclusive reply, a very unsatisfactory situation — both on humanitarian and other grounds — for all concerned.

The following steps are being taken to prevent the backlog from increasing still further:

- rationalization of the evaluation process;
- overtime work, which would not be possible without special financing provided by the Federal Republic of Germany;
- expansion of existing facilities and installation of new equipment, including of computers (VDUs).

However, the ITS is not out to achieve short-term peak productivity but rather to find the best medium-term solution for providing the most complete information possible, in accordance with the assurances given by its mandate.

The history of the International Tracing Service is the history of half a century of humanitarian endeavour to alleviate the effects of past injustice. The work of the ITS continues in that same spirit.

Charles-Claude Biedermann

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